

King Offa 757AD -796AD
(Mercian King and Bretwalda of England)



Offa was ruler of Mercia, one of the most powerful kingdoms in Anglo-Saxon England that was equivalent to an extended version of the English Midlands region that we still have today. He ruled from 757AD until July 796AD. At the height of his power he was accorded the title of Bretwalda or overlord of England and its many petty kings.

Offa was the son of Thingfrith and a descendant of Eowa. As such Offa had a claim on the throne of Mercia because Eowa was brother to King Penda. Penda was Mercian King from 625AD - 655AD.

Offa came to the throne after a period of strife within Mercia. These events were sparked off by the assassination of the Mercian King Aethelbald. He had ruled Mercia from 716AD to 757AD and was allegedly killed by his own bodyguards. Aethelbald was then replaced as king by Beonred. Offa defeated Beonred before the end of 757AD and from that point Offa ruled the lands of Mercia until his death in July 796AD.



The troubled background that led to Offa claiming the Mercian throne meant that in the early years of his reign he was forced to consolidate his rule within his kingdom. He was also forced to re-establish his over-lordship and control over the neighboring Anglo-Saxon

thereafter. Many surviving coins from Offa's reign carry elegant depictions of him.



Some of his coins carry images of his wife, Cynethryth. She was said to be the only Anglo-Saxon queen ever to be depicted on any coin.

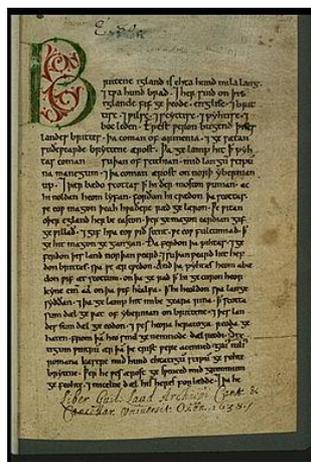


Many historians regard Offa as the most powerful Anglo-Saxon king before Alfred the Great. However his dominance never extended to the northern Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria, though he gave one of his daughters in marriage to the Northumbrian King Æthelred I in 792AD.

Historians once saw his reign as part of a process leading to a unified England but this is no longer the typically held view. In the words of Professor Simon Keynes of Cambridge University "Offa was driven by a lust for power, not a vision of English unity; and what he left was a reputation, not a legacy."

Offa left no lasting dynastic legacy because his son ruled for only 141 days as king and replaced by a distant relative. Professor Keynes' view therefore appears to be both accurate and correct.

However the power and prestige that Offa attained in his lifetime secured him long lasting fame and it is fair to describe him as one of the most significant rulers Anglo-Saxon England. Unfortunately no contemporary biography of Offa survives. A key source of information for this period of English history is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.



A page from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

The *Chronicle* was created in Wessex in the time of King Alfred and copies were distributed to different monasteries and abbeys around England. These copies were updated by different authors at different times and in different locations. Given its origins this source is thought to be biased in favour of the rulers of Wessex and therefore may not be an accurately account of what was truly achieved by Offa. He was after all a Mercian ruler and not a Wessex King.

His influence also spread beyond Anglo-Saxon England itself. In Wales we know all too well about Offa's Dyke. It was almost certainly built in his reign and still stands today as a testimony to the extensive resources Offa had at his command and his ability to organize them effectively. It is assumed to have been built because Offa was frequently in conflict with the various Welsh kingdoms along his Western border.



There was a battle between the Mercians and the Welsh at Hereford in 760AD and Offa is recorded as campaigning against the Welsh in 778AD, 784AD and 796AD in the 10th century *Annales Cambriae*. This was a Latin account of events of the time written by Welsh Churchmen at St David's.

As a result of these numerous wars Offa constructed a great earthen barrier that runs approximately along the border between England and Wales. It is mentioned by the Welsh monk Asser in his biography of King Alfred "A certain vigorous king called Offa ... had a great dyke built between Wales and Mercia from sea to sea"

Most historians find no reason to doubt Asser's attribution. Early names for the dyke in both Welsh and English also support the view that it was built by King Offa.



Despite Asser's claim that the dyke ran "from sea to sea" it is currently thought that the original structure only covered about two-thirds of the length of the border. In the north it ends near Llanfynydd which is less than five miles from the coast, while in the south it stops at Rushock Hill, near Kington in Herefordshire which is of course a number of miles inland. The total length of this section of dyke is about 64 miles.

Other earthworks also exist along the Welsh border and of these Wat's Dyke is one of the largest. However it is not possible to date them relative to each other and so it cannot be accurately determined whether Offa's Dyke was a copy of or the inspiration for the construction Wat's Dyke. It would seem that the debate here would be similar to that over the origins of the 'Chicken or the Egg'.

The construction of the dyke suggests that it was built to create an effective barrier and to command views into Wales. This in turn implies that Offa was free to choose the best location for the dyke. There were 8th century settlements to the west of the dyke that had names that imply they were English. It may be that in choosing the location of the barrier the Mercians were surrendering some territory to Welsh.



Alternatively it may be that these settlements had already been retaken by the Welsh, implying a defensive role for Offa's barrier. The effort and expense that must have gone into building the dyke are impressive and suggest that the king who had it built (be that Offa or someone else) had considerable resources at his disposal.

A further theory is that a number of earthwork dykes and defenses existed dotted along the Mercian / Wales border before Offa became king. Offa may have joined these previous constructions together with sections of his own dyke filling in the gaps left by previous Anglo-Saxon rulers. Given that this era was what was once called 'The Dark Ages' we may never truly know.

Offa's diplomatic relations with Europe are documented for posterity but appear to belong only to the last dozen years of his reign.

In about 789AD King Charlemagne proposed that his son, Charles, marry one of Offa's daughters. Offa countered with a request that his son, Ecgfrith, should also marry Charlemagne's daughter Bertha. Charlemagne was however outraged by the request and broke off contact with England. He even banned English ships from landing in his ports.



In 796AD Charlemagne wrote to Offa and this correspondence between the two kings produced the first surviving documents in English diplomatic history. The letter is primarily concerned with the status of English pilgrims on the continent and with diplomatic gifts but it reveals much about the relations between the English and the Franks. Charlemagne refers to Offa as his "brother" and mentions trade in cloth exported from England to the Franks.

In his book *Anglo-Saxon England*, Professor Stenton argued that Offa was perhaps the greatest Anglo-Saxon king commenting that "No other Anglo-Saxon king ever regarded the world at large with so ... acute a political sense".

This is an older interpretation of Offa's achievements and many historians writings some fifty (50) years or so ago would have regard Offa's achievements as second only to Alfred the Great among the Anglo-Saxon kings. This was because Offa's reign was regarded as a key part of the historical process that led to a unified England.

This is no longer the general view among historians in the field. It is now believed that Offa thought of himself as "King of the Mercians" and that his military successes were part of the transformation of Mercia from an over-lordship of Midland peoples into a larger and powerful and aggressive kingdom.

Offa ruled as a Christian king but despite being praised for his piety and efforts to "Instruct his people in the precepts of God" he came into conflict with Jaenberht, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Jaenberht had been a supporter of Egbert II of Kent, which may have led to conflict in the 760s when Offa is known to have intervened in Kent. Offa rescinded grants made to Canterbury by Egbert and it is also known that Archbishop Jaenberht claimed the monastery of Cookham, which was a holy site that was in Offa's personal possession.

In 787AD Offa succeeded in reducing the power of the Archbishop of Canterbury through the establishment of a rival archdiocese at Lichfield. A possible reason for the creation of an archbishopric at Lichfield relates to Offa's son, Ecgrith of Mercia. After Hygeberht became Archbishop of Lichfield, he consecrated Ecgrith as future Mercian king. The ceremony took place within a year of the new Archbishop of Lichfield's elevation.

One theory is that Jaenberht as Archbishop of Canterbury had refused to perform the anointing ceremony for Offa's chosen heir and that Offa needed an alternative archbishop for that purpose. The parallels here between Offa's argument with the Church and that of Henry II with St Thomas Beckett are quite remarkable.

The ceremony itself is noteworthy for two reasons: it is the first recorded consecration of any English king and it is unusual in that it asserted Ecgrith's royal status while his father was still alive.

Despite his somewhat personal feud with the Archbishop of Canterbury Offa was a generous patron of the church. He founding several churches and monasteries. Among these was St Albans Abbey, which was founded in the early 790s. He also promised a yearly gift of several thousand silver pennies to the Pope in Rome.



St Albans Abbey

The founder members of the Chapel of King Offa in Chepstow wanted to give their chapel a unique name. The choice of King Offa reflects the special and specific geographic location of this branch of the Commemorative Order of St Thomas of Acon. The choice was clearly an excellent one as the founders have chosen to name their chapel after the greatest 8th century Anglo-Saxon King and one who was second only to King Alfred of Wessex in the contribution he made to the creation of Anglo-Saxon England. The fact that this South Wales chapel of our order is based near to the English border is also very clearly reflected in the name of this famous and remarkable Mercian ruler.

We should also note that King Offa was himself in conflict with the Church in his time as king and more especially with an Archbishop of Canterbury. This makes the choice of the Chapel of King Offa all the more appropriate and so very thoughtful. For this we can all be grateful to the founder members of this branch of our very special and unique order within Freemasonry.